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Sustainable development: the role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia

Letter dated 12 June 2013 from the Permanent Representative of Kyrgyzstan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In accordance with rule 13 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, I have the honour to request the inclusion of a new sub-item, entitled "The role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia", under item 19 on "Sustainable development" of the provisional agenda of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly.

In accordance with rule 20 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, an explanatory note in support of this request (annex I) and a draft resolution (annex II) are attached hereto.

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annexes circulated as a document of the General Assembly.

(*Signed*) T. T. **Kydyrov**
Permanent Representative of the
Kyrgyz Republic to the United Nations

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Annex I

Explanatory note to the draft General Assembly resolution on "The role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia"

During the second half of the twentieth century, a number of environmental problems arose in the Central Asian countries as a result of the region becoming the main source of raw materials for uranium ore extraction and processing in the former Soviet Union.

The uranium industry was under centralized State control. The flow of information on uranium production was strictly controlled from the top down by the relevant bodies of the Soviet Union's Ministry of Medium Machine-Building Industry. Companies were secure facilities, extraction companies did not keep archival information on extraction and processing technologies and there was no horizontal data sharing among the different industrial plants.

All organizations in the sector applied identical regulatory standards (safety standards) to control irradiation and radioactive contamination at uranium ore extraction and processing sites, thereby reducing the administrative burden imposed. Radiation safety standards were comparable with similar standards in Europe and the United States of America in the 1960s and 1970s. However, a bonus system provided many incentives to enhance production indicators, while insufficient attention was paid to environmental safety and health issues.

In order to address the problems caused by the legacy of industrial uranium extraction and processing practices in the Central Asian States, the historical features of the uranium industry's development in the region should be considered, as well as the prevailing conditions in the Central Asian republics since independence.

During the transition period, with its economic, political and social problems, the technical conditions for radioactive waste management deteriorated, which increased the risk of possible accidents. There was a real danger of pollution of the groundwater and rivers of the water basin throughout Central Asia, which would have major consequences not only for millions of people and the environment, but also for the whole sustainable development process in the countries of the region. It could take several decades and significant financial resources to mitigate the consequences of such accidents and disasters.

In this connection, the Kyrgyz Republic, in conjunction with other Central Asian States, is actively engaged in efforts at the international level to avert the radioactive threat posed by uranium tailings ponds. The joint appeal made by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Secretariat of the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to Governments, international financial institutions, private sector representatives and other organizations, signed in the Kyrgyz Republic in September 2007, provided a framework for the consolidation of efforts to reduce the risk posed by radioactive waste to people and the environment, the strengthening of sustainable development in the Central Asian countries, and the mobilization of donor assistance from international organizations and the private sector.

Subsequent to the above appeal, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Republic of Tajikistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan, in cooperation with UNDP and other international organizations, organized a high-level international forum "Uranium tailings: local problems, regional consequences, global solution", which was held in Geneva on 24 June 2009. The joint declaration, issued by the International Forum and adopted by the Central Asian States, UNDP, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Union, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and EURASEC, noted the importance of regional cooperation in the following priority areas: improvement of the legislative framework, rehabilitation and elimination of tailings ponds, development and implementation of special programmes and projects to improve monitoring, and the implementation of health and humanitarian measures to enhance the quality and standards of living of the population living in the regions where the tailings ponds are located.

It is clear that the main problems relating to the legacy of uranium in the region can only be resolved with targeted and coordinated assistance from the international community. The Kyrgyz Republic hopes that the increased attention and interest of the international community in these issues will lead to successful management of the national and regional environmental risks and prevention of a humanitarian crisis, while ensuring sustainable development in the Central Asian States and eliminating the risk of radioactive waste being used for extremist and terrorist purposes.

For that very reason, in order to address the problem of ensuring environmental safety and sustainable development in the region, the Kyrgyz Republic has prepared a draft General Assembly resolution on "The role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia".

Annex II

Draft resolution

The role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia

The General Assembly,

Taking into account the results of the high-level international forum "Uranium tailings: local problems, regional consequences, global solution", held in Geneva on 26 June 2009,

Attaching particular importance to the protection of human health and the guarantee of fundamental human rights through the prevention of potential natural and man-made disasters, for the current and future generations,

Noting that numerous burial sites for uranium waste and other extremely dangerous radioactive processing wastes are located in densely populated areas of the Central Asian countries,

Noting also that many tailings ponds are located in seismically active areas close to population centres and the banks of major rivers in the region, and are subject to the threat of land and mud slides,

Considering that, despite the efforts made by the States of Central Asia at the national level, and also the support of international programs and projects to recultivate former uranium mines and tailings ponds, a number of States continue to have serious social, economic and environmental problems,

Striving to contribute to strengthening the integrity and safety of radioactive materials,

Taking into account that the Governments and peoples of the Central Asian States are aware of the threat of possible natural or man-made disasters and their global consequences for the lives and health of a large number of people and the environment,

1. *Notes* the paramount importance of rehabilitation of the areas affected by uranium extraction plants;

2. *Recognizes* the need to devise and promote effective programmes and projects for the sustainable management of radioactive and toxic waste in Central Asia;

3. *Also recognizes* the role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia and emphasizes the importance of adopting preventive and other measures to resolve the problem of radioactive and toxic waste and completely rehabilitate the polluted areas in accordance with the highest safety standards and best global practice;

4. *Calls on* the international community to assist the States of Central Asia in resolving the problems of uranium tailings ponds and emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation in the following priority areas: improvement of the legislative framework, management and maintenance at safe levels of uranium waste and other radiation tailings ponds, rehabilitation and elimination of tailings ponds,

development and implementation of special programmes and projects to improve the monitoring of their safety, raising public awareness, taking measures to prevent people from gaining access to polluted materials, implementing health and humanitarian measures to enhance the quality and standard of living of the population in the regions where the tailings ponds are located;

5. *Further calls on* the international community to continue active sharing of experience and knowledge so as effectively to resolve the problems of uranium, radiation and toxic tailings ponds;

6. *Expresses support* for the efforts made by the States of Central Asia in devising and implementing their country programmes and also for the intention of States in the region to hold further bilateral and multilateral negotiations to prevent the radiation threat in Central Asia.